S. Korea's former president jailed for five years

SEOUL: A South Korean judge sentenced former president Yoon Suk Yeol on Friday to five years in prison for obstructing justice and other crimes linked to his disastrous martial law declaration and in its chaotic aftermath.

It is the first in a series of verdicts for the disgraced ex-leader, whose brief suspension of civilian rule in South Korea on Dec 3, 2024, prompted massive protests and a showdown in parliament.

Now ousted from power, he faces multiple trials for actions taken during that debacle and in the turmoil that followed.

On Friday, judge Baek Dae-hyun at Seoul's district court said he found Yoon guilty of "obstruction of justice" by blocking investigators from detaining him.

YOON Suk Yeol—AFP/file

Baek said that Yoon abused his power by turning officials of the presidential security service against the state and used them as his "personal guards" serving his "own safety and private interests".

Yoon was also found guilty of excluding cabinet members from a martial law planning meeting.

"Despite having a duty, above all others, to uphold the constitution and observe the rule of law as president, the defendant instead displayed an attitude that disregarded the... constitution," Baek said.

"The defendant's culpability is extremely grave," he said.

But Yoon was not guilty of forging official documents due to lack of evidence, the judge added.

Yoon has seven days to appeal.

Prosecutors had called for a 10-year prison term, while Yoon had insisted no law was broken.

After the verdict was announced, his supporters outside the court fell silent for several minutes before breaking into chants of "Yoon again!"

Yoon's lawyers said the verdict "simplifies the boundary between the exercise of a president's constitutional authority and criminal liability".

"If this reasoning is allowed to stand, no future president will be able to act decisively in times of crisis," lawyer Yu Jeong-hwa told reporters.

Yoon defiant

It comes days after prosecutors in a separate case demanded Yoon be sentenced to death for his role as the "ringleader of an insurrection" in orchestrating the imposition of martial law.

They argued Yoon deserved the severest possible punishment as he had shown "no remorse" for actions that threatened "constitutional order and democracy".

If he is found guilty it is highly unlikely the sentence will actually be carried out, as South Korea has had an unofficial moratorium on executions since 1997.

Yoon was seen smiling in court as the prosecutors demanded the punishment.

And the former leader and top prosecutor has remained defiant, saying his martial law declaration was a lawful exercise of his presidential authority.

In closing remarks on Tuesday, he insisted the "exercise of a president's constitutional emergency powers to protect the nation and uphold the constitutional order cannot be deemed an act of insurrection".

He accused the then-opposition party of having imposed an "unconstitutional dictatorship" through their control of the legislature. "There was no other option but to awaken the people, who are the sovereign."

The court is scheduled to rule on the insurrection charges on Feb 19.—AFP

Trump gets his wish after Nobel laureate hands over her medal

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last month and complained bitterly when he was snubbed.

Though Machado gave Trump the gold medal that honourees receive with the prize, the honour remains hers; the Norwegian Nobel Institute has said the prize cannot be transferred, shared or revoked.

Asked on Wednesday if he wanted Machado to give him the prize, Trump told Reuters: "No, I didn't say that. She won the Nobel Peace Prize."

The Republican president long expressed interest in winning the prize and has at times linked it to diplomatic achievements.

The lunch meeting, which appeared to last slightly over an hour, marked the first time the two have met in person. Machado then met with more than a dozen senators, both Republican and Democratic, on Capitol Hill, where she has generally found more enthusiastic allies.

In a statement on X, the Nobel Peace Centre in Oslo noted that: "A medal can change owners, but the title of a Nobel Peace Prize laureate cannot".

The statement recalled that some Nobel Peace Prize medals have been passed on, such as Dmitry Muratov's medal, which was auctioned for over $100 million to support refugees from the war in Ukraine.

But "[o]nce a Nobel Prize is announced, it cannot be revoked, shared, or transferred to others. The decision is final and stands for all time," the Norwegian Nobel Committee was quoted as saying.—Agencies

SYRIANS use a boat to flee a Kurdish-controlled area in Rasm al Harmal, east of Aleppo, before a deadline set by the army to evacuate the region.—AFP

US intervenes to ease tensions between Syrian govt, Kurds

ALEPPO: A US-led coalition intervened on Friday to reduce tensions between Syria's government and Kurdish forces, with Damascus determined to expel them from an area in the country's north.

After driving Kurdish forces from Aleppo last week, the Syrian army deployed reinforcements near the Kurdish-controlled Deir Hafer, some 50 kilometres east of the city, ordering Kurdish fighters to leave the area.

The Syrian government is seeking to extend its authority nationwide following the ousting of longtime leader Bashar al-Assad in Dec 2024.

Farhad Shami, spokesman for the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, said the coalition had met with them in Deir Hafer on Friday.

Following the meeting, a Syrian military source said that "a delegation from the Syrian defence ministry entered the Deir Hafer area to negotiate with SDF leaders".

The US envoy for Syria, Tom Barrack, posted on X that he was working "around the clock" to prevent any escalation between Kurdish fighters and government forces, both of which have US backing.

The situation in Deir Hafer was calm after the Syrian army's deadline for civilians to flee had expired.

Civilians fleeing

Quoting local authorities in Deir Hafer, Syrian state television reported that "more than 4,000 civilians" had left the Kurdish-controlled region.

Some of them were seen using a rickety bridge to cross a branch of the Euphrates River.

The military had used the same tactic in the city of Aleppo last week, telling civilians to depart before shelling Kurdish-held districts.

"The SDF stopped us from leaving – that's why we used an agricultural back road and then crossed the bridge," said 60-year-old Abu Mohammad, who was accompanied by relatives.

Civilians have been fleeing the area on back roads since Thursday.

Syrian authorities had extended the deadline to flee until Friday, accusing the SDF of preventing civilians from leaving, a claim the group dismissed as "unfounded".

'Hurry and defect'

Syria's military called on members of the SDF on Friday to "hurry and defect from this organisation and return to your country and your people".

The SDF in a statement said it believed these calls were intended to "create discord among the region's communities".

On Sunday, government troops took full control of Aleppo city after capturing two Kurdish-majority neighbourhoods.

The fighting came as progress to implement a deal in March to fold a Kurdish de facto autonomous administration in the north into the state had stalled.

The SDF controls swathes of Syria's oil-rich north and northeast, much of which it captured during the country's civil war and the fight against the militant Islamic State group over the past decade.

Nanar Hawach, senior Syria analyst at the International Crisis Group, said that capture of Aleppo's Kurdish-held areas "doesn't change the military balance" but shows that Damascus "can impose costs when negotiations stall".

While Syria's government "cannot replicate" this scenario in the northeast, "it can apply sustained pressure along contact lines" like Deir Hafer.—AFP

Trump threatens tariffs on countries that don't back Greenland takeover plan

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump said Friday he may impose trade tariffs on countries that don't support his plans to take over Greenland, part of the territory of Denmark.

"I may put a tariff on countries if they don't go along with Greenland, because we need Greenland for national security," Trump said at a health roundtable at the White House. "I may do that," added Trump.

Trump compared the possible Greenland tariffs to those that he threatened on France and Germany last year over the price of pharmaceutical products.

The threat is the latest pressure tactic by Republican Trump as he steps up his bid to acquire the autonomous Arctic island, a goal that he has threatened to achieve by military means if necessary.

Trump claims the United States needs mineral-rich Greenland and has accused Greenland of not doing enough to ensure its security against rivals Russia and China.

European nations have in recent days shown their support for North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) ally Denmark and Greenland over Trump's escalating threats, including by sending troops to the strategic territory.

The foreign ministers of Denmark and Greenland visited the White House on Wednesday for talks to defuse the issue, but said afterwards that they remained in "fundamental disagreement" with Trump.

But the United States, Denmark and Greenland had agreed to set up a working group to continue talks every two to three weeks on the issue, the White House said on Thursday.

US Congress members visit Denmark

A bipartisan US Congress delegation began a visit to Copenhagen on Friday to voice support for Denmark and Greenland after Trump threatened to take over the Arctic island, an autonomous Danish territory.

The two-day visit comes alongside a European show of support in the form of a military reconnaissance mission to Greenland.

The 11 congressmen and women were to hold talks with Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and her Greenlandic counterpart Jens-Frederik Nielsen.

The group arrived at the Danish employers' association Dansk Industri around midday for discussions with business leaders.

They were due later to meet members of the Danish parliament, over which the Greenlandic flag was raised on Friday in a show of unity.

"We are showing bipartisan solidarity with the people of this country and with Greenland. They've been our friends and allies for decades," Democratic Senator Dick Durbin told reporters.

"We want them to know we appreciate that very much. And the statements being made by the president do not reflect what the American people feel," he added of Trump.

An AFP reporter in Copenhagen saw a large black van leave Frederiksen's office shortly before noon on Friday, but her office declined to confirm whether the meeting had taken place.

The delegation's visit follows a meeting in Washington on Wednesday at which Danish representatives said Copenhagen and Washington were in "fundamental disagreement" over Greenland.

In Greenland's capital, Nuuk, residents welcomed the show of support.

"(US) Congress would never approve of a military action in Greenland. It's just one idiot speaking," a 39-year-old union representative said.— AFP

King Salman in hospital for tests

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's King Salman had his medical tests taken at a hospital in capital Riyadh on Friday.

"The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques is undergoing medical examinations today... at King Faisal Specialist Hospital in Riyadh," the royal court said in a statement shared on state media.

Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest crude oil exporter, has for years sought to quell speculation over King Salman's health.

The 90-year-old monarch has been on the throne since 2015, though his son Mohammed bin Salman was named crown prince in 2017 and acts as de facto ruler.

The monarch's well-being is rarely discussed, but he has been admitted for surgery and tests on multiple occasions in recent years. In 2024, the royal court said he suffered from lung infections, which he recovered from.

President, PM wish swift recovery

President Asif Ali Zardari conveyed his best wishes and prayers for the Saudi king's health.

"On behalf of the government and the people of Pakistan, President Zardari extended heartfelt wishes for King Salman's swift and complete recovery," a statement by the presidency said.

"He (President Zardari) emphasised that the people of Pakistan hold him in the highest esteem, reflecting the deep-rooted and fraternal ties between the two nations.

"The people of Pakistan join me in praying for King Salman's continued health and vitality. We pray that Allah Almighty grant him strength and long life to continue leading Saudi Arabia toward further progress and prosperity."

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said he was deeply concerned by the news that King Salman was in hospital for medical tests.

In a post on *X*, he said: "Deeply concerned by the news that His Majesty King Salman bin Abdulaziz is admitted in hospital for medical tests.

"The people of Pakistan hold His Majesty in the highest esteem. We join our Saudi brothers and sisters in praying for King Salman's swift and complete recovery to full health, vitality, and continued leadership."
—Agencies

Court's 'cold case' ruling casts doubt on other probes

PARIS: France's top court ruled on Friday it was too late to try a man who confessed to a murder decades after his victim disappeared, a judgement that could affect other "cold case" investigations.

The Court of Cassation ruled that Yves Chatain, who in 2022 confessed to the 1986 murder of 25-year-old Marie-Therese Bonfanti, could not be tried because too much time had passed.

The court rejected the argument of France's top prosecutor Remy Heitz for a more flexible view of the statute of limitations.

Addressing the court in November, he had warned that if the court did not do so, it would jeopardise similar "cold cases" under investigation.

Of 22 cases being investigated by a unit specialising in unsolved historic cases, said Heitz, seven could be affected if the court confirmed the ruling on the statute of limitations in the Bonfanti case.

Marie-Therese Bonfanti disappeared in May 1986 in the Isere region in eastern France. Her partial remains were only discovered after Chatain, long a suspect in the case, finally confessed to having strangled her.

Friday's ruling however, closed the door on any possibility of prosecuting Chatain.

The victim's husband Thierry Bonfanti denounced the ruling. "This is a terrible day for us," he said, tears in his eyes.

"It's incredible to hear this from a justice system of which we are the victims," he added.

"I don't know how it's going to work in future for the 'cold case' unit, but if it's to get results like this one, I wish them the best of luck," said Bonfanti, surrounded by other members of the family.—AFP

A dyed-in-the-wool opposition leader

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in Balochistan, Mehmood Khan was seen as the natural successor to contest the by-election, and was handed the reins of the party his father founded after parting ways with that opposition powerhouse, the National Awami Party (NAP).

The nascent Pakhtunkhwa National Awami Party was just a few years old when Mehmood Khan had to put aside his grief and run for office.

But this was no ordinary political contest. Some political observers at the time had painted it as a contest between then-Afghan president Daoud Khan and Pakistan's then-prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

Heir to Abdul Samad's legacy

This was because the Afghan ruler opposed his father's idea of forming a separate Pashtun-majority province in Pakistan, as it clashed with his vision of a 'Greater Pashtunistan', and saw the ascendency of Abdul Samad's son as a threat to his plans.

Abdul Samad Achakzai had parted ways with NAP when, following the abolition of the One-Unit policy in 1970, it accepted the merger of 'British Balochistan' with the Brahui confederacy, to form the map of Balochistan as it stands today.

Abdul Samad was a proponent of a united Pashtun province, to be formed by merging the Pakhtun areas in the south with what was then the NWFP.

Although the mystery surrounding his assassination was never satisfactorily solved, many believe that it was his demand for the unification of Pakhtun lands that cost Abdul Samad his life.

In January 1974, just days before his maiden electoral contest, Mehmood Khan received a message saying that a senior Afghan official wanted to meet him. Accordingly, he travelled to a village near the Chaman border alongside two companions — one of whom had been his martyred father's deputy.

There, they were met by the Governor of Kandahar, who tried to prevail on the young man to abandon his father's legacy and rejoin NAP.

Although the account has doubtlessly been embellished over time, the story goes that the novice Mehmood Khan showed remarkable courage and refused point-blank.

"This is the political legacy of my leader and father. It is the principled stance for which he was martyred. If President Daoud considers this a contest with Bhutto, then tell Daoud he has already lost," he reportedly told the official.

No stranger to opposition politics

Born in the village of Inayatullah Karez, in Gulistan, Qilla Abdullah (which was part of the Quetta-Pishin district at the time), Mehmood Khan has played a central role in shaping and leading various opposition political movements in Pakistan, consistently standing for democratic rights, the Constitution and federalism.

Under the Ziaul Haq regime, he was an active member of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), allying with progressive and democratic forces to resist military rule.

In 1983, while leading an anti-martial law agitation in Quetta, he and his companions came under direct fire from the authorities. Although he survived — thanks to his companions who shielded him from the bullets — many of his supporters were killed, injured or arrested.

In the late 1990s, he co-founded the Pakistan Oppressed Nations Movement, bringing together nationalist parties from smaller provinces to fight for provincial autonomy and equal rights within the federation.

Later, as part of the All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM), he joined the political forces opposing Pervez Musharraf's military regime.

More recently, he became a prominent figure in the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), which came together to unseat former PM Imran Khan through a vote of no-confidence in 2022.

However, he quickly became disillusioned with his allies and, following the 2024 general elections, began siding with the 'persecuted' PTI.

Having consistently decried the latest polls as being less than free, fair and transparent, he became one of the leading lights of the Tehreek-i-Tahaffuz Ayeen-i-Pakistan (TTAP), the alliance that currently dominates opposition politics in the country.

A historic appointment

Mr Achakzai is the first politician from Balochistan to assume the office of leader of the opposition in the National Assembly. His nomination came as a surprise for many political observers, who had earlier been claiming that he was unlikely to be appointed to the position as he was not in the good books of the powers-that-be.

Several political analysts commend Mr Achakzai for showing political magnanimity by supporting the PTI after the 2024 elections, despite having been subjected to public criticism and personal attacks by PTI founder Imran Khan in the past.

During the 126-day sit-in led by Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri against the PML-N government in 2014, Mr Achakzai had aligned himself with the Sharif-led administration.

Later, he remained part of the ruling coalition under two successive PML-N governments but declined ministerial positions or other high-profile offices. During the 2013–18 PML-N tenure, his brother, Mohammad Khan Achakzai, served as governor of Balochistan.

Known for his hard-hitting speeches, Mr Achakzai has often faced media blackouts, both under the current government and during the previous National Assembly when the PTI was in power.

Now that he has been appointed opposition leader – who traditionally enjoys the privilege of getting the floor any time during assembly proceedings – it remains to be seen what approach the government will adopt toward coverage of his speeches.

Amir Wasim in Islamabad also contributed to this report